

I had misgivings about registering in July for the Summer Writers' Workshops at the University of Iowa. Last time I enrolled in college, after glancing at my transcript, the registrar asked whether I preferred the maintenance department or campus security.

Also, the drab summer spent at the old ranch with two cowboys from Iowa, who hopped from a boxcar at Noelke Switch, hung heavy in mind. In the 90 days of outdoor fun, doctoring the stock and hauling gravel from the Big Draw in a wagon, the only time those grim-faced hombres smiled was the morning the Big Boss agreed to take them to the bus station to go home.

My traveling partner kept the momentum going by registering and making reservations. She led in finding hotel rooms in Iowa City and further arranged for two weeks of classes as close to our points of interest in poetry and prose as possible under the strong demand for classes.

Cedar Rapids is the closest airport to Iowa City. Airline rules on rescheduling a return trip bothered me. Once rail lines linked to the shortgrass country added passenger cars for the fall and spring semesters to ship bronco ranch boys home after they were expelled from boarding schools and church colleges. Rail service ended decades ago; nevertheless, the long-ago memory of trying to sleep in a rocking chair car drenched in regret, dreading every turn of the wheels and every release of the steam at

the whistle stops signaling one lap closer to fate, lingers forever.

An old friend recommended the workshops. He's a hot-headed steady contributor to "letter to the editor" sections. He suggested a two-week course at the university to add fire to my copy. I was hard bent to understand the adding fire part, being a supporter of pacifism milder than the Quaker doctrine and too much of a milksop to take a stand on the Missionary Society's proposal to sing under candlelight on Christmas Eve.

His advice did connect in reverse. First day in class, I worried how to remain neutral in case the campus broke into a wild picket-swinging protest over an Iowa feed yard's downwind contribution to the atmosphere, or a farmer spraying his corn patch too close to an Interstate.

I know from long experience that the president of the senior class at the blind school could spot my orientation at the first tap of his cane on my boot toe. Too many times before, disguised in an English tailored jacket, an Oxford cloth shirt, a custom-made bow tie over Bond Street pants, seated deep in a leather chair in a faraway hotel lobby, I drew questions from strangers asking if Mertzon had had rain or Barnhart still had a cafe.

But after witnessing the summer school students' devotion to talking on cell phones the first day, the fears dissolved. The new technology divided the students into such minute, singular beings; demonstrations need

personalities like the unabomber, or whatever those solo nuts are called.

First day's assignment brought further light. The professor assigned us to write dialogue by eavesdropping on conversations in restaurants. Turned into a difficult task. Hard to understand a college lad's muffled voice while talking on his cell phone with a mouth full of pasta, or a coed's gargled pitch, taking a call while holding a straw in one side of her mouth and sucking from a tea glass.

We graybeards have to be mighty careful how we behave around swarming hives of young folks, too. Impossible to be inconspicuous in an Italian food joint full of blue ink-tattooed kids if your cosmetic emanates a gray sheen last seen in the painting of the senior staff of the Confederate Army. The best armor is to wear a deep scowl to avoid the risk of an old man rap.

I tried to explain to the teacher the barrier of studying dialogue through eavesdropping while handicapped by an ear accustomed to the Southern inland dialect. (I add inland dialect to assuage any fellow citizen sensitive to the way we sound in the shortgrass country.) She insisted English was universal in the United States. I agreed her English might be universal, but once in the Pennsylvania Dutch region, I ordered a delicate veal cutlet in lemon wine sauce and ended up matching an order of atrophied beef liver and cell-dead onions to a duel between man and platter that was ruled a draw only after the brown gravy congealed.

The eavesdropping proved colorful. Counted "cool" 16 times in one five-minute conversation. Tabbed "awesome" a flat two dozen times in a 10-minute script. Was shocked by the popularity of expletives and profanity in the college students' vocabularies until I overheard a couple of professors so deft in conjugating the street word for copulation that I deferred to the academic.

Each day class became more comfortable. I behaved in fine form. Made a high mark on the first day's assignment, as my classmates couldn't understand what I read out loud.